

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks at a State Dinner Hosted by President Shimon Peres of Israel in Jerusalem, Israel

March 21, 2013

President Peres. I think that's the President's remarks. Mr. President, can I read your speech, if you want me to? [*Laughter*] They are mistaken. [*Laughter*]

President Barack Obama, my dear friend, let me say first of all, bravo. Bravo, President.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you tonight. I was moved the way in which you spoke to the hearts of our young Israelis. Our youngsters, in time of need, are always willing to stand up and defend their country. Today you have seen how much the same young people long for peace. How enthusiastic they were, how engaged they were, listening to the vision of peace, which you beautifully delivered and moved the heart.

Mr. President, this morning several rockets were shot from the Gaza Strip toward the civilian targets in Israel, including Sderot, that you have visited. From here, in the name of all of us, I want to convey our love to the inhabitants of the south around Gaza, who carry this heavy burden courageously and continue to plow their land, their—plant their trees, raise their children. It is an inspiration to each of us. Today the enemies of peace spoke in the only language they know: the language of terror. I am convinced that together, we shall defeat them.

Dear Barack, your visit here is a historic event. We are so happy to receive you and your distinguished delegation. I am very glad to see Secretary John Kerry, a reassured friend. John, I know you are and I know you will be successful. I'm not sure that the prophets have had speechwriters—[*laughter*]*—*but if they had, I imagine Isaiah would have said—but actually, he has said on that occasion, and I'm quoting him—"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation." Well, you have to be satisfied with my tired language; I cannot speak like him. [*Laughter*]

It is my privilege to present you with our country's highest honor: the Medal of Distinction. This award speaks to you, to your tireless work to make Israel strong, to make peace possible. Your Presidency has given the closest ties between Israel and the United States a new height, a sense of intimacy, a vision for the future.

The people of Israel are particularly moved by your unforgettable contribution to their security: You are defending our skies. To you—[*inaudible*]*—*in the domain of intelligence, which is the right way to preempt bloodshed. The diplomatic and the military bonds between us have reached an unprecedented level.

When I visit you in Washington, I thought in my heart, America is so great, and we are so small. I learned that you don't measure us by size, but by values. Thank you. When it comes to values, we are you, and you are us. On occasions when we were alone, you stood with us so we were not alone. We were alone together. We shall never forget it.

During your previous visit to Israel, you asked me if I had any advice to offer. Well, it's not my nature not to let questions go unanswered. [*Laughter*] So I suggested that, while people say

that the future belongs to the young, it is the present that really belongs to the young. Leave the future to me. I have time. [Laughter]

I think I was right, because the moment you came into office, you immediately had to face daunting and demanding challenges day in, day out. I prayed that you would meet them with wisdom and determination, without losing hope, without allowing others to lose hope. The prayers were answered; after all, they came from Jerusalem, and they came to us as a great message. It is a tribute to your leadership, to the strength of your character, to your principles, that you have never surrendered to hopelessness. You stood and stand firmly by your vision. Your values serve your nation. They serve our nation as well.

So I know that you will never stop to strive for a better world, as you say today in a good Hebrew, *tikkun olam*. We have a rich heritage and a great dream. As I look back, I feel that the Israel of today has exceeded the vision we have had 65 years ago. Reality has surpassed the dreams. The United States of America helped us to make this possible.

Still, the path to tomorrow may be fraught with obstacles. I believe that we can overcome them by our determination and by your commitment. I'm convinced that you will do whatever is necessary to free the world's horizons and the skies of Jerusalem from the Iranian threat. Iran denies the Shoah and calls for a new one. Iran is building a nuclear bomb and denies it. The Iranian regime is the greatest danger to the world peace. History has shown time and again that peace, prosperity, and stable civil society cannot flourish when threats and belligerency abound.

Ladies and gentlemen, tonight the Iranian people are celebrating their New Year, Nowruz. I wish them, from the depths of my heart, a happy holiday and a real freedom.

Israel will seize any opportunity for peace. Being small, we have to maintain our qualitative edge. I know that you responded and will respond to it. The strength of Israel is its defense forces. They afford us the ability to seek peace. And what America has contributed to Israel's security is the best guarantee to end the march of folly, the march of terror and bloodshed.

We watch with admiration the way you lead the United States of America, the way you stayed true, time and again, to your bonds of friendship with us. Your commitment and deeds speaks volumes about the principles that guides America. To strive for freedom and democracy at home, but also all over the world, you send the boys to fight for the freedom of others. What is uplifting is that the United States brought freedom not only to its own people, but never stops, and never will stop, to help other people to become free.

You represent democracy at its best. You have deepened its meaning: namely, that democracy is not just the right to be equal, but the equal right to be different. Democracy is not just a free expression, but is self-expression as well.

You exemplify the spirit of democracy by striving for justice and equality of opportunity in the American society. As the world has now become global and yet remains individual, and you offer those principles. You have shown global responsibility and individual sensitivity.

On Monday night, Mr. President, we shall celebrate Passover, the festival of freedom, the celebration of spring. The celebration of spring means our journey from the house of slaves to the home of the free that started more than 3,000 years ago. We remember it every year. We are commended to feel as though each of us personally participated in that journey. We shall

not forget where we came from. We shall remember always where we are headed to, which is to make the Promised Land a land of promise: a land of freedom, justice, and equality.

While reality calls for vigilance, Passover calls to remain believers. Israel is an island in a stormy sea. We have to make our island safe, and we wish that the sea will become tranquil. We converted our desert into a garden. It was achieved by the talents of our people and the potential of science. What we have done, Mr. President, can be done all over the Middle East, as you have rightly said tonight. Israel is described as a startup nation. The Middle East can become a startup region.

Dear President, you noted in your address today that peace is the greatest hope for the human being. I share your vision. Your call to reopen the peace process may pave the way for the implementation of the two-state solution agreed by all of us, as you said: a Jewish state, Israel; an Arab state, Palestine.

If I'm not wrong, next to you sits our Prime Minister, who was just reelected. He opened his address in the Knesset by reiterating his commitment to the two-state solution. Dear friends, I have seen in my life—I earned the right to believe—that peace is attainable. As you felt today, I know, this is the deep conviction of our people. With our resolve and your support, dear Barack Obama, we shall win, and it will happen.

Mr. President, I am privileged to bestow upon you the Medal of Distinction. It was recommended by a committee of seven prominent Israeli citizens, headed by our former Chief of Justice Meir Shamgar, and includes our former President Yitzhak Navon. It was my view and I was glad to accept their recommendation. You inspired the world with your leadership. *Toda raba*, Mr. President. *Toda* from a grateful nation to a very great leader.

God bless America. God bless Israel.

[*At this point, the citation was read, and the President received the medal. President Peres then offered a toast.*]

President Obama. Thank you so much. President Peres; Prime Minister Netanyahu and First Lady Sara; distinguished guests and friends: This is an extraordinary honor for me, and I could not be more deeply moved. And I have to say, after the incredible welcome I've received over the past 2 days and the warmth of the Israeli people, the tribute from President Peres, the honor of this medal, I mean, as you say, *dayenu*.

Now, I'm told that the Talmud teaches that you shouldn't pronounce all the praises of a person in their presence. And, Mr. President, if I praised all the chapters of your remarkable life, then we would be here all night. [*Laughter*] So let me simply say this about our gracious host. Mr. President, the State of Israel has been the cause of your life: through bitter wars and fragile peace, through hardship and prosperity. You've built her. You've cared for her. You've strengthened her. You've nurtured the next generation who will inherit her.

Ben Gurion. Meir. Begin. Rabin. These giants have left us. Only you are with us still: a founding father in our midst. And we are so grateful for your vision, your friendship, but most of all, for your example, including the example of your extraordinary vitality. Every time I see your President, I ask him who his doctor is. [*Laughter*] We all want to know the secret.

So with gratitude for your life and your service, and as you prepare to celebrate your 90th birthday this summer—and since I'm starting to get pretty good at Hebrew—[*laughter*—let me propose a toast, even though you've taken away my wine—[*laughter*]. Come on. Bring another one.

How are you?

Server. Here you are, sir. You're welcome.

President Obama. A toast. *Ad me'ah ve'esrim. L'chaim!*

[*A toast was offered.*]

Mmm, that's good wine. [*Laughter*] Actually, we should probably get this out of the photograph. All these people will say I'm having too much fun in Israel. [*Laughter*]

Just a few more words, Mr. President. You mentioned that this medal is presented in recognition of progress toward the ideals of equality and opportunity and justice. But I am mindful that I stand here tonight because of so many others, including the example and the sacrifices of the Jewish people.

In a few days, as we do at every seder, we'll break and hide a piece of matzoh. It's a great way to entertain the kids. Malia and Sasha, even though they are getting older, they still enjoy it. And there are a lot of good places to hide it in the White House. [*Laughter*] But on a much deeper level, it speaks to the scope of our human experience: how parts of our lives can be broken while other parts can be elusive; how we can never give up searching for the things that make us whole. And few know this better than the Jewish people.

After slavery and decades in the wilderness and with Moses gone, the future of the Israelites was in doubt. But with Joshua as their guide, they pushed on to victory. After the First Temple was destroyed, it seemed Jerusalem was lost. But with courage and resolve, the Second Temple reestablished the Jewish presence. After centuries of persecution and pogroms, the Shoah aimed to eliminate the entire Jewish people. But the gates of the camps flew open; there emerged the ultimate rebuke to hate and to ignorance: Survivors would live and love again.

When the moment of Israel's independence was met by aggression on all sides, it was unclear whether this nation would survive. But with heroism and sacrifice, the State of Israel not only endured, but thrived. And during 6 days in June and Yom Kippur one October, it seemed as though all you had built might be lost. But when the guns fell silent, it was clear: "The nation of Israel lives."

As I said in my speech earlier today, this story—from slavery to salvation, of overcoming even the most overwhelming odds—is a message that's inspired the world. And that includes Jewish Americans, but also African Americans, who have so often had to deal with their own challenges, but with whom you have stood shoulder to shoulder.

African Americans and Jewish Americans marched together at Selma and Montgomery, with rabbis carrying the Torah as they walked. They boarded buses for freedom rides together. They bled together. They gave their lives together: Jewish Americans like Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner alongside African American, James Chaney.

Because of their sacrifice, because of the struggle of generations in both our countries, we can come together tonight, in freedom and in security. So if I can paraphrase the Psalm: they turned our mourning into dancing; they changed our sack cloths into robes of joy.

And this evening, I'd like to close with the words of two leaders who brought us some of this joy. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Poland and lost his mother and sister to the Nazis. He came to America. He raised his voice for social justice. He marched with Martin Luther King. And he spoke of the State of Israel in words that could well describe the struggle

for equality in America. "Our very existence is a witness that man must live toward redemption," he said, and "that history is not always made by man alone."

Rabbi Joachim Prinz was born in Germany, expelled by the Nazis, and found refuge in America, and he built support for the new State of Israel. And on that August day in 1963, he joined Dr. King at the March on Washington. And this is what Rabbi Prinz said to the crowd:

"In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic concept. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity."

President Peres, Prime Minister Netanyahu, friends: Our very existence, our presence here tonight, is a testament that all things are possible, even those things that, in moments of darkness and doubt, may seem elusive. The stories of our peoples teach us to never stop searching for the things—the justice and the peace—that make us whole. And so as we go forward together with confidence, we'll know that, while our countries may be separated by a great ocean, in the realm of the spirit, we will always be neighbors and friends.

I very humbly accept this award, understanding that I'm accepting it on behalf of the American people, who are joined together with you.

May God bless you, and may He watch over our two great nations. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:15 p.m. at the President's Residence.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Israel, President Peres.

Locations: Jerusalem, Israel.

Names: Netanyahu, Benjamin; Netanyahu, Sara; Obama, Malia; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Peres, Shimon.

Subjects: Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Minorities :: Anti-Semitism; Israel : President; Israel : President Obama's visit; Israel : Presidential Medal of Distinction, presentation to President Obama; Israel : Prime Minister; Israel : Relations with U.S.

DCPD Number: DCPD201300171.